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Mark Banks, Rosalind Gill and Stephanie Taylor (eds.)

***Theorizing Cultural Work: Labour, continuity and change in the cultural and creative industries.* London: Routledge, 2013, (ISBN:9780415502337), 206pp.**

Reviewed by FREDERICK H. PITTS, UNIVERSITY OF BATH

Defining cultural work as 'symbolic, aesthetic or creative labour in the arts, media or other creative or cultural industries' (p. 4), *Theorizing Cultural Work* is composed of three sections, each addressing a specific issue. The first, 'Histories', examines claims as to the perceived newness of the precariousness and insecurity of cultural work, suggesting that historical evidence shows that some precedent does exist for the conditions and experiences of creatives in the contemporary economy. Susan Luckman explores the resonances one finds between contemporary discussion and turn-of-the-century debates on good and bad work in the Arts and Crafts movement. Sarah Brouillette explores the manner in which artistic labour has been held up as a model for work in general, as an individualistic pursuit unburdened by, and in direct opposition to, the strictures of the 'social'. Bridget Conor examines the way in which contemporary screenwriters draw upon a 'collective history of their profession' to craft a 'theorization and mythologization' (p. 45) of good and bad work in the sector. Concluding the first section, Kate Oakley examines the absence of the topic of work from public discourse, locating this absence in a pervasive reluctance to engage with and problematize work.

Where the first section calls into question the historical specificity of contemporary cultural work, the second, 'Specificities/transformations', attempts to delineate what is specific about it. Matt Stahl explores the extent to which cultural notions of what work is influence definitions of cultural and creative labour. Next, Jason Toynbee depicts the 'specialness' of cultural work as a device through which ideas around copyright are mobilised, enforcing 'the commodity status of cultural goods' (p. 86). Brett Neilson analyses of the logistical and productive networks that support the cultural industries. Similarly, Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, invite us to consider the physical work performed by those at the bottom of the international division of cultural labour. Finally Melissa Gregg explores the way in which the breaching of the formal boundaries of the traditional work-life balance calls into question the ability to demarcate exactly where and to which activities the specificities of cultural work can be said to pertain.

The third part, 'Futures', contains reflections upon the future trajectories we can project from the understanding of past and present established in the previous two sections. Sarah B. Proctor-Thompson's contribution reflects upon the way in which the concept of 'difference' is mobilised in presently disempowering manifestations of gender inequality. Next, Lisa Adkins considers the methodological ramifications of the fractured working lives of cultural workers, critically reflecting upon the usage of work biographies as a research method. Mark Deuze and Nicky Lewis continue this preoccupation with the professional identities and individual and collective distinctiveness of cultural workers, suggesting that the wider prevalence of labour individualization makes the particular individuality of cultural workers less distinctive. The collection concludes with an interview conducted with Andrew Ross, engaging with the present characteristics of cultural work in the United States in the context of the Great Recession and its aftermath.

The collection calls upon us to consider the specificity of cultural work and cultural workers in a context of claims that we are all, in fact, 'cultural workers now' (p. 3), and in which ephemerality and intangibility appear as hegemonic characteristics pervading all labour in capitalist society. The most attractive response to this is that of Matt Stahl, who suggests that cultural work 'presents a limit case of work in general: it is an example the extremity of which discloses logics essential to the category in heightened form' (p. 73). Thus immaterial labour (Lazzarato 1996) and the rise of cultural industries may be seen not as newly challenging phenomena which render redundant pre-existing understandings of the abstract laws of capital, but rather phenomena which clarify and refine such analyses, providing much richer examples for their application than traditional forms of factory labour ever could.

There is considerable cynicism expressed about the concept of immaterial labour and its relevancy to cultural work. Toynebee asserts that cultural work such as that of the actor cannot be said to be properly immaterial, incorporating as it does physical and bodily practices (p. 90). Neilson and Maxwell and Miller highlight the reliance of cultural work upon an international division of cultural labour in which the supposed immateriality at one end is supported by the hard materiality of work at the other. However, what Stahl's suggestion of the 'limit case' status of cultural work implies is that we need not necessarily dispute immateriality on the basis that some workers defy

this categorisation. Rather, the insight to be drawn from the study of cultural work is that immateriality is a constant feature of capitalism's abstract movement which finds a particularly adequate analytical and empirical expression in the work performed at the top of the international division of cultural labour. By virtue of this, cultural work possesses considerable heuristic utility for the wider study of the capitalist economy.

Similarly, the radical newness attributed to present-day precariousness is contested in the first section. However, the book provoked me to reflect upon how precariousness, insecurity and vulnerability might offer the immanent possibility of an alternative to current forms of work. The book engages with the debate over 'good' and 'bad' work, whereby, for Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, p. 36), good is defined as that which provides 'autonomy' and 'self-realisation', and bad that which grants only 'control' and 'dependence'. Interestingly, in contrast a number of contributions to the collection seem to conceptualise bad work as that which places employees in a position of much too great authority and precisely does not place them in a position of dependence vis-à-vis others. It is worth reflecting at greater length about the implications of this, especially in the context of a growing anti-work literature (e.g. Weeks 2011).

Take Luckman's eulogizing of Victorian guild life, with its holistic utopias where craftspeople decamp en masse to the countryside to share every minute of their work and leisure time together. What is 'bad' about contemporary cultural work is taken to be its atomism, its precarious and individualising loosening of social ties. It is implied that an alternative inspiration might be the collective community Luckman describes, where employees are night-and-day subject to their status as workers, forever in the company of their bosses and colleagues. Instead of bemoaning the lack of such communities in our own time, one might see contemporary work in this way, albeit writ large, as Gregg's contribution on the fractured boundaries between cultural work and life suggests. In this, the 'badness' of cultural work may be seen to consist not in its lack of collectiveness and inclusivity, but rather in the very way that it, like all work, includes, collectively and absolutely, workers on terms not of their own choosing.

Interestingly, Brouillette gives a critical indication of how cultural work might be conceptualised as an 'anti-social' force capable of undermining capitalist labour. Challenging the celebration of the 'anti-social' and 'insecure' status of cultural workers

as an alternative to mainstream work relationships, she suggests that the anti-sociality of such individuals is compromised by its reference to the same set of social circumstances from which those individuals spring. As in Luckman, it is rather to a project of 'anti-egoism' and 'sympathetic community' that the effort for better work must be directed (pp. 42-43). However, I would argue that, harnessed correctly, insecurity and precariousness may facilitate an escape from the social relations that bind humans to bad work. Possibilities in this direction are suggested in statements of cultural workers as the alleged 'worker[s] of the future' (p. 3). Against the book's negative assessments of these possibilities, I would resist the denial that cultural work presents, in however small a manner, a way forward. Features of cultural work- the sharing of creative goods, the loosening of employment contracts, greater individualisation- offer an anticipatory promise of the surpassing of present relations of employment through the progressive weakening of the ties that bind workers to work.

As Toynbee asserts (p. 93), claims as to the specialness of cultural work arise from a normative challenge to capitalist rationality, and for this reason, 'cultural work encompasses an idea about what work in general *could* be like' that we 'ought to take seriously'. However, as Toynbee concedes, the autonomy promised in this idea is restricted to an elite of workers, 'shaped by the domination of capital over labour'. We can therefore retain a critical stance by appraising the potentiality of cultural work not as something *already achieved*, but as something that is only *immanent within* the present, with the capacity to fully flower in the future. In order for it to do so, the wage relationship must be broken, Toynbee suggests (p. 97), to the extent that creative activity escapes the yoke of payment altogether and eludes its subordination to the logic of capitalist valorisation. In spite of the savage impact upon individuals and communities that its enforced and unequal distribution has wrought, the anti-social insecurity and precariousness excoriated in some of the contributions in this volume may offer the basis for this break, likely accompanied by demands such as shorter working hours, a basic income, and what Ross calls the 'steady move towards the 'commons'' and 'mutual aid' among young artists and cultural workers (p. 182).

Before any of this can happen, however, the idea of work itself must be critiqued. We might suggest the denaturalisation of work as a remedy to the 'exclusion of work' from public discourse noted by Oakley (p. 65). If something is natural, commonplace and

given, why not exclude it from public discourse? In this spirit, the volume implies that the critique of ideas and ideology is not secondary to empirical analysis of the 'facts', but rather allows us to access the very reality of things in capitalist society and offers the opportunity of its undermining. Of the contributions that commit themselves to the critique of ideas, Conor is especially insightful on the topic of how discourses and ideas perform a standardising function, making different forms of cultural work intelligible, comparable and continuous through time and space, a commensuration vital to the ongoing reproduction of a system of exchange based upon the division of labour. This conveys that the world of ideas is not just reflective of economic phenomena, but constitutive of them, in that they help guarantee the social relations and practices of which the economy is composed.

The concept of work itself is part of this ideological context, and must be questioned in order to open up the possibility of its overcoming. The contribution the book makes to this critical project is substantial. However, the collection does not go far enough in destabilising the category of work itself, constituting a series of brilliant critiques of a handful of its myriad manifestations. Illustrative are the words Luckman quotes of Ruskin on the desirability of full employment, whereby what is to be 'overcome in a just organization of labour' is not labour itself, but instead the incompatibility of economic demand with full employment (p. 23). Such a position exposes the way in which work is taken as something natural and given from which no absolute deviation is possible, and to which our desires and demands must bend rather than the reverse. The attempt to imagine other ways of organising the meeting of our desires and demands is made all the more necessary by the all-encapsulating spread of work into every pore of existence. This a situation exacerbated in cultural work, Gregg suggests, concluding that '[l]abour activism is powerless to meet these challenges with its current vocabulary' (p. 133). This volume gives valuable succour to the development of a new vocabulary. However, the confusion between what constitutes good and bad work displays that the 'givenness' of work upon which the distinction is based must be surpassed, and it is with theory that this must in the first instance be done. The theorising of cultural work may reveal not *cultural* work to be the problem, but rather the problem to be *work* itself.

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